



This controversial painting of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, depicting the moment when the U.S. government secured a huge tract of Native American land in 1851, hangs in the Capitol. Submitted image.

## Panel nears decision on Capitol art

By: Chris Steller ☺ January 6, 2016 🗨️ 0

Interested observers should soon get a hint about the fate of the 148 works of art long familiar to people who visit or work at the Minnesota State Capitol — whether left in place, perhaps with additional up-to-date interpretation, or moved within the Capitol building or even off site.

The Art Subcommittee of the Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission is in the throes of preparing a January preliminary report with an initial set of recommendations on the topic for the full preservation commission.

The panel met for much of Jan. 4 and has another meeting set for Jan. 11. The report, likely ready in February, is expected to include the subcommittee's first leanings on hot topics such as art at the Capitol — particularly paintings depicting Native Americans — that some people say is offensive or insensitive.

Two tribes have responded to letters from Gov. Mark Dayton asking for their input, the subcommittee learned. Subcommittee member Anton Treuer, a professor at Bemidji State University, said his sense of a public input meeting in Bemidji was that people preferred to see some of the controversial paintings moved from such high-profile venues as the governor's reception room.

"This is the million-dollar question," Treuer said. "We might have to do things quite differently than they have been done."

Another topic that looms large, if not quite as controversially, is the future of the portraits of Minnesota governors that have graced prominent spots in Capitol hallways since the 1940s.

One proposed solution has been tagged a "Hall of Governors," where interested visitors could view the portraits, likely augmented with interpretive materials to provide context about their lives and times.

But several on the panel said Jan. 4 they found the moniker "Hall of Governors" too suggestive of a specific room or grand solution — when ultimately they may land on a plan that designates a place or places for the governors' portraits to hang that would fall short of the grandeur called up by the "Hall" phrase.

Guiding subcommittee members will be the opinions of members of the public. Mariah Levison, manager of the Minnesota Office for Collaboration and Dispute Resolution at the state Bureau of Mediation Services, presented preliminary results from the panel's efforts at gathering public input.

Those efforts included a series of public meetings across the state as well as an online survey. Members of the subcommittee hosted the public meetings, which typically attracted 20 to 50 interested and sometimes simply curious people. More than 3,000 people responded to the online survey.

"We welcomed the public to provide input and they stepped up," said subcommittee co-chair Rep. Diane Loeffler, DFL-Minneapolis.

Levison highlighted several strong areas of focus for (old, or perhaps new) Capitol art from the online survey, including historic events that shaped Minnesota as well as the diverse peoples of Minnesota. People at public input sessions stressed the importance of presenting a variety of stories, told in engaging ways, Levison said.

Many at public input sessions favored moving controversial art. Results on that question from the online survey aren't ready yet.

The discussion continued in the afternoon, with reports including word of a panel member breaking into song and contentions that some paintings force racist images on visitors, but their removal would cause an uproar.

The issue has attracted comment on the Internet beyond the subcommittee's online survey. The Healing Minnesota Stories blog, the online outlet of an advocacy group that has been closely tracking the subcommittee's progress, expressed dismay that the panel might punt on determining the fate of Capitol works of art. Such an outcome, it said, would "reflect very poor planning on the part of the state — that leaders failed to create a schedule that would allow for timely decisions." The conservative Power Line blog has also weighed in, predicting that "the forces of revisionism are likely to lose this particular battle."

Along with Loeffler, Sen. David Senjem, R-Rochester and former state Supreme Court Justice Paul H. Anderson are co-chairs of the subcommittee.

The full Minnesota State Capitol Restoration Project is carrying a price tag of \$310 million, already appropriated by the Legislature. Last June the project was granted \$3.25 million from a Legacy Bill for Capitol Art Restoration appropriation.

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